

MOTHER TO BUDDIE

Drawings by Harvey Emrich

By SARA LINDSAY COLEMAN



"The hack crept forward and passed on!"

ROXANNA parted the neat muslin curtains that hung at her kitchen window and looked out at the sun poised for its setting above the long chain of hills purpling in its dying splendor and looking back at her. It was only in its setting, in its dropping from sight behind the great hills, that it watched her like a big evil red eye, that it mocked her and seemed to say, "Another night; not this one, Roxanna!"

With quick, light steps she crossed the kitchen floor. At the door she looked back. All was in readiness and the fire lighted in the kitchen stove. On the table covered with a neat cloth a tender young chicken was ready for frying; in neat rows the biscuit lay in their pans ready for baking. In the dining room the table set for two was laid with the best china. The side table held a heaped up, sweet-smelling, crimson pile of strawberries, and there was a fat jug of crinkly cream and a snowy square of coconut cake. It was Buddie's birthday, and it was sunset. At sunset the hack that each day brought passengers from the station some twenty miles away got in.

Roxanna walked through her wide, old-fashioned hall and out on the wide, old-fashioned portico where her roses on their latticed support flung their blooming sprays to the second story. She came down the steps and on to the gate. With searching eyes she swept the road that lay beyond her grounds. The hack was getting in. Across the river and beyond the bridge it crawled down the hill like a sluggish black beetle. Over the bridge and climbing the hill to the village it was lost to sight. Roxanna watched for its appearance on the brow of the hill in an expectancy so tense and breathless that it was painful. She fixed her eyes on the spot where the wheels would cease their slow revolution and old Hiram Green would jerk up his listless horses with a "Whoa, Nellie! Stand still a leetle there, Vick!" if a boyish figure was there to leap over the wheel.

The hack crept forward, reached the spot that held Roxanna's strained vision, and passed on.

Mechanically Roxanna turned from the gate and went up the walk back to the flower-covered portico; mechanically she stooped and plucked one of her sweet-smelling pinkies that crowded in fragrant confusion with pansies and nignonne. The porch reached, she dropped into a chair limply.

At the beat of horse hoofs she got up, came to the porch steps, and stood there trembling. Her Roderick—or Buddie, as she still called him—hated the crawling hack. Sometimes he made the twenty miles in a reckless dash that left a panting, dripping steed at the gate.

BUT it was not Buddie. Prissy Fox ambled up and slipped from her old white nag, Prissy Fox, bearer of information for the village. She tied the dejected little nag, opened the gate, closed it, and came up the walk, her black calico walking skirt lifted and flung across her arm.

"The hack's in; but I seed ye a lookin' yore eyes out, it a bein' Roddy's birthday. He has got a reason fer stayin' away this Saturday—I'll grant him that." Unbidden she seated herself, took off her hat, fanned with it, and rocked back and forth violently. "Warm, ain't it?" she said.

Roxanna's head bowed in assent. For the life of her she could not have spoken. She too seated herself.

"The hack's got in, an' Mayme Joyner that's bein' studyin' dressmakin' down to Atlanta's home. She's bein' sewin' fer them pretty Carmichael girls that boarded at the hotel last summer. An' they live plumb ferment the fine house where your Roddy lives with the girl he married an' her father. They call it a road. Nobody don't live on it but rich folks. An', Roxanna," Prissy's sharp, virginal features took on a sort of ecstasy of the news carrier, her shrill voice rose, "yistridly when Mayme let, as she come out o' the house there was a doctor comin' out o' Roddy's father-in-law's house. Knowin' the store ye set by Roddy, she stopped the doctor an' axed him what the trouble was. 'Tain't no trouble, rilly; it's a baby. I was up to the office to get the mail, an' I jes' raked over to tell ye. But I reckon Roddy's telegraphed ye."

Before racking over Prissy had inquired, and had learned that there was no telegram. Now as she looked at Roxanna her face hardened. It seemed to take shape from her thoughts; for Roddy's mother had not spoken. But the hand that held the pink had crushed it.

TWENTY-FIVE years before the woman under whose roof Prissy now sat, then a girl of seventeen, had married Joe Randall, a boy of twenty, was the only child of a rich New Orleans widow. Phenomena had left his lungs weak, and the particular spot to which he was rushed in Nature's sanatorium was the little town of Farmington, which looked down on the river's shining loop and out on the encircling, shimmering hills of Carolina.

From his first glimpse of her Joe Randall had been enamored of Roxanna's fair and childish beauty, his imagination touched by her rather lonely life in the big, lonely house that set itself apart from the village life, as did the old Governor, Roxanna's grandfather, who had been sent down from the hills to the capital as its executive more times than once.

Young Randall had fancied Roxanna, and Prissy had fancied him, the handsome city chap so different from any man she had known. Three months after he came Joe Randall married Roxanna. The old Governor turned them from his door. Six months later it opened to Roxanna, a child herself, and deserted by the man to whom she was to bear a child.

The old man was stricken with paralysis and died before the baby's birth. The village people said Roxanna's trouble had killed him. They were full of pity for the child-wife; all, that is, but Prissy Fox. Prissy's young face set grimly at the mention of Roxanna's name. She said she had got what she deserved for trustin' the gallivantin' ways of a stranger, forgettin' how vager she had been to trust his ways.

Through all the years since that day of Prissy's speech—twenty-five of them, by count of winter snows and summer roses—Roxanna's feet had never strayed beyond her own domain. To Prissy, sharper of tongue and of feature, skilled in scandal and more severe on lovers, the subject of Roxanna behind her latticed shelter was what a red rag is to the bull in whose face it is thrown. Many times she had declared that if the time ever came when she had the chance she would tell Roxanna what she thought of her—and the time had come!

SHE caught her breath as a swimmer might before he plunged into a high-running sea, sniffed suspiciously, for a soft little wind brought betrayal of sweet culinary secrets on its wings, and leaped into speech.

"Ye've bein' deserted afore, Roxanna, an' folks air sayin' it's come to ye ag'in. Joe Randall keered more fer money 'n he did fer ye. Ef he hadn't, his mother couldn't a toled him away. Folks said when Roddy married that highfalutin young thing down to Atlanta that these mountains, an' ye too, Roxanna, had lost him—the love o' money an' rich ways bein' in his blood. I ain't sayin' they ain't down on Roddy fer treatin' ye so; they air! It looks like she's weaned him from ye, don't it, now?"

Roxanna's silence baffled Prissy. But it was too late for retreat. The sensitive, fragibly beautiful face, a face filled with refinements of thought and feeling that were beyond her, baffled Prissy too. In the fading light, with that startled look on her face, it might have been the young Roxanna of seventeen and not the woman who for twenty-five years had hidden from her little world that sat so still under the lash of Prissy's ruthless tongue.

"It ain't wise to school a chile an' travel it above ye. It ain't wise to set it up an' worship it as the Israelites did the golden calf, makin' sacrifices to it an' sayin', 'This is my God,' as all know ye've done, Roxanna. 'Tain't Roderick blood that's in yore boy. Folks say he's runnin' with a rich set down to Atlanta that keers nothin' fer the old Governor, ef ever they heard of him. They say he's ashamed o' comin' from this village, an' ashamed o' ye."

"Ye think ye fool folks. They know Atlanta's a day's journey. They know how ye set here an' wait. They know flowers bloom on the table o' his room summer an' winter. An' they know a Saturday don't hardly pass without big bakin' in this house. Folks kin smell, ef ye do live set apart. There's some that's allus pitted ye. I'll admit ye give her an' Roddy them first three months a gallivantin' an' honeymoonin' in Europe an' hev done without yore cook since—but 'tain't much to cook an' clean fer one. Ef ye'd had any one backbone at all, ye wouldn't a hid here like a nun. An' I allus said, deserter blood bein' in Roddy—"

ROXANNA had risen. "Prissy!" Her voice rang shrill with the snapping of a lifetime's tension. "Joe Randall's mother did take him from me. We were nothing but children—both under age. That was her hold of him. She cut off the money—all his life he had spent recklessly. When she threatened to disinherit him it frightened him. He went back to try and make his peace with her. She got the doctor to say that he must have an ocean voyage. To keep him away from me she dragged him to the ends of the earth. All of you knew that he never came back; but no one ever knew that after his death she wrote that I had killed him,—that he was weakened by moping for me and in that way contracted typhoid. She killed him, and she killed me. Two joyous young lives slaughtered by the sword of her ambition!"

Roxanna gasped, fought against her choking breath. "I could have said! My son was entitled to his father's money. But," fiercely, "I hated her blood-spoiled money!"

"Laws a massy, Roxanna! Set down afore ye drop." Roxanna's voice was like a cry for help on a storm-beaten sea. "People say we grow used to loss. They who say it have never lost. We lose, and out of our loneliness we learn how to love. Because I love Roddy I have given him to that young girl who is his wife. All his life I have been making him ready, preparing him to make her happy. History shall not repeat itself. They shall adjust their lives without interference from me! You say I make excuses for Roddy; that he has not been home since his marriage,—twelve months,—and Atlanta only a day's journey. I write him not to come. I write him to stay with her. She has not been strong. If I have looked for him," her voice broke, "looking is a habit with the lonely."

Roxanna paused to master her voice, then continued. "Will you go now, Prissy? Tell the people they do not understand my son and me, and tell them," again she fought against the choking in her chest, "that I am going to Atlanta tomorrow."

"The land o' Goshen!" Prissy shrieked. "An' ye not past this gate sence ye was seventeen! Don't ye know that rough o' hack'll break every bone in yore body?"

"Will you tell them? And will you go now, Prissy?"

Prissy went. From the gate, the old white nag mounted, she called back. "Mebby ye forgot the hack, don't run Sunday 'thout Hiram's got a passenger. I'll stop by an' tell him fer ye." She cantered down the hill.

IT was Hiram Green himself who had said the only way to keep some people down was to put them in a hole and pile dirt on them. He had said he doubted if even that would keep Prissy Fox down.

Night fell, deepened; mists rose from the river; the